

## Civil War Book Review

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## **Interview**

### **CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: TO RAISE UP A NATION: JOHN BROWN, FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AND THE MAKING OF A FREE COUNTRY**

**King, William S.**

**Fall 2014**

Interview with William S. King, independent scholar

Interviewed by Zach Isenhower

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***Civil War Book Review (CWBR)***: Today the Civil War Book Review is proud to speak with William S. King, an independent scholar making his debut in the Civil War Era, and discuss his book, *To Raise Up A Nation: John Brown, Fredrick Douglass, and The Making of A Free Country*. Thank you for joining us today.

**William S. King (King)**: Well I'm glad to be here.

**CWBR**: So just to get us started, describe to me what brought you to this subject, not only recovering John Brown as a key player, but then linking him to Fredrick Douglass and using these two lives to sort of tell this very large story of the era?

**King**: Yes, well my links with John Brown go back to my earliest childhood. I lived in that area of Kansas in the early 1950's with my parents and have active memories through the years, of the battlefields there, of John Brown's presence. More than that I would say in the development toward my journey to writing something like this was the impact of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. In all of its phases, and I feel that I have been very shaped and profoundly affected by it in all of its phases. I think to really to really put a point on it one of the impetuses of me developing toward was the killings that developed, of course

Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King himself and Malcom X, and many others that sacrificed their lives in a very American way in the sense that they were targeted individuals, because they became outspoken and became effective. In this struggle that we've had in America we've had with race relations, but my initial contact which moved me into this book was reading Du Bois' *John Brown* and there one has a point meeting in the stone quarry outside Chambersburg between Fredrick Douglass and John Brown. Essentially all we know about it come from Douglass's narration of it in his *Life and Times*, and of course he talked about it in a few other venues as well. At the end of his account Brown puts his arm around Douglass after two days of discussion, and it was a comprehensive discussion, when he says, "Come with me Douglass I will defend you with my life. When I strike the bees will begin to swarm and I shall want you to help me hive them." But Douglass as we know refused to go and broke off with John Brown at that point, and the rest transpired. I wanted to write that story and that led me to the other biographies of John Brown and Fredrick Douglass, and his own writings (*Life and Times*), the works of Benjamin Quarrels, and Phil Foner. That story gets repeated but is never elaborated on, causing my reading to keep branching out. I was living in New York City at the time and I had the great fortune of getting laid off this was back in the 1970s and took myself to the New York library picking books I had noticed in my reading, which were interesting and out of print coming from the nineteenth century volumes. I began reading in, crucially, in some people that had known Brown and had written biographies of him notably Richard Hinton, Franklin Sanborn, and James Redpath. I began, not having been able to write anything yet, but just gathering notes and experience, which grew out. I had been familiar with the story the Civil War, several years prior to this I had read the entire series by Bruce Catton on the Civil War. That's basically what it was and I struggled with this writing for a number of years and kept reading. That is where it began its development, from that specific incident in the stone quarry outside Chambersburg.

**CWBR:** It sounds like part of what drew you to the story of Brown was this (and the link that would obviously connect him to much later figures you mentioned Dr. King and Medgar Evers), is this notion of sacrifice and then is that sort of the link that then led you to branch out and explore the myriad instances of sacrifice--many of them nameless by these people that are soldiers and commanders?

**King:** I think that's really the crux of it, although I don't overtly state that, but I think that's what moved me through this. And it's a process of revelation

too, because there is so much that's obscure about this aspect of antebellum period because there's such contradictory views on John Brown and the understanding of what he did is very ill thought-out in most, if not all regards. The relationship of Douglass and Brown, which is crucial to understand this whole era, has not been a source to study for everybody. They leave it at the brief statements that Douglass makes, and Brown didn't make any, then leave it at that. But there's a whole area that can be open up to this portal, as it were.

**CWBR:** Do you think that part of how Brown has been misunderstood is basically then what sort of prevents people from exploring the relationship between Brown and Douglass? You mention early in the book that Brown has sort of become this caricature; he's sort of eternally the depiction in the *Tragic Prelude* that hangs in the Kansas state house, of this larger than life kind of crazy man. How does that prevent us from exploring his relationship with Douglass?

**King:** Well in the matters that pertain to the Civil War his story by in large has not really had a comprehensive grasp of the nature in the meaning of American slavery. The fact that it is often a peripheral discussion in the matters of the civil war, even a great work like Bruce Catton's volumes. I recall him saying in his book *The Coming Fury*, which was on the precursor to the Civil War, the 1850's, he really devotes one line to state of the slaves and their stake in the issue saying, "the mute and luckless negro." That's his phrase and he really doesn't develop a view of slavery or of the agencies blacks really had, both enslaved and free, in bringing on that war and in its resolution. I find that many historians, and my latest experience was with David Blight, a professor at Yale University who is a magnificent scholar on the Civil War as you know, I just happened to take myself to the internet and watched his twenty-two part lecture series of an hour each on the Civil War. He devotes a whole chapter to John Brown, but is appallingly miserable in his discussion of Brown as a historical figure. Partly that is because they haven't felt that they really had to think through what he did and they're deriving all their information from sources that really had a negative view about him and haven't penetrated for several reasons the meaning of Harpers Ferry. In one of them they sort of cap the whole thing on this notion that he was trying to raise a slave insurrection there of significant proportions, which I show in the book was not the case at all, and certainly it would have defeated all efforts he was trying to accomplish there if he had been able to do that, which is just fantastical. I just find that they haven't thought it through, which is a great failing of scholarship because there is plenty of material available. Notably, in Brown's own words, if you really study them if you get away

from this notions of him being a mono-maniac who was mad and was a bloodthirsty, cold blooded killer, which he wasn't. You have to see what he was grappling with and the difficulties presented. One of the things I was able to bring out was that he was definitely trying to foreshorten what he saw to be the terrible war that did come. He saw that, and it wasn't a fantastical, God-driven apparition, he really understood his time, and the potentials that war would unleash. Although there is magnificent work done, I don't think scholars have really gotten to the root of that war.

**CWBR:** So, you have, as I understand as your saying, when you're trying to decide how to evaluate Brown, and of course evaluating Brown sort of a matter of deciding which of his words to weigh his actions against. It seems that a lot of historians have weighed his state of mind against his words where he says, oh I would like to seize the armory and start an insurrection. So they have decided that weighed against those goals, Brown must have been a failure and basically, as I understand, what you're saying is historians should take more seriously when he writes about the moral impetus slavery and how very seriously he took that? Since for him the political issue couldn't be divorced from the moral issue, so then the evaluation of what he's doing shouldn't be either?

**King:** Right, but I think they still miss the point in terms of what he was trying to accomplish at Harpers Ferry. It was not a slave insurrection in the terms it's been conceived in most commentary. His son, who's mentioned in the book, had an interesting remark saying that all writers had failed to appreciate that his father was trying to bring about the split in the Union. That was his point of striking at Harpers Ferry. It was not an irrational, ill thought-out thing. He was trying to topple the very foundation of the political structure of the Union which at that time had a huge slavery component, and was undermining the foundations of the republic as he saw. He was kicking the legs out from under the stool.

**CWBR:** That is very interesting about the perspective that you bring because John Brown is not completely alone in this of course. One thing I found very interesting about the book is that you're always keeping track of the more familiar Civil War narrative, but at the same time this is a story that is often told from the perspective of so-called extremists. You're highlighting the grassroots narratives that are essentially the opposite of those examined by our last guest, Rachel Sheldon, who wrote about this sort of "Washington bubble," the fact that a lot of these politicians in Washington, they do conceive of these things as completely political issues with political solutions and they're really surprised by

secession and by the ferocity of the war. In many ways the war is a rejection of them and we're seeing that here too. We're seeing fire-eaters seceding against Lincoln's initial expectations and we see Wendell Phillips echoing John Brown by welcoming secession, because it's going to eventually seal abolition. It's an intriguing juxtaposition, the sort of a larger narrative that I think a lot of readers will find very familiar, and then this sort of grassroots undercurrent. Would it be fair to say you think the grassroots as not only dragging the nation to the conflict, which I think a lot of historians would agree with, but that consistently the grassroots has to keep dragging laggard military planning and politics throughout the war?

**King:** Yes, I agree 100% on that, though their defeat is what compelled them to go in the direction the grassroots were pulling them. They weren't able to resolve this war in fact they were on the verge a number of times and people like to point this out that there could have been a Southern victory. It wasn't impossible, or there could have been a victory that was achieved with an independence of sorts, of course things would have continued after that, that wouldn't resolved anything at all. It did come to a revolutionary peak. It was a complete transformation that fact that they accepted these regiments of black soldiers after the Emancipation Proclamation. It's not at all that they had a significant impact on the battlefield. They had an impact and at times an important one, but the underlying fact was the whole direction and the meaning of a confederacy was undermined by that fact, of these black men in arms who have been enslaved in the south. That utterly defeated slavery. It couldn't go on. They had then to throw in the towel even though they continued to fight on, because it was a possibility even as late as Appomattox that there could have been a political compromise. That compromise didn't go away with defeat of the confederacy it reemerged as you note in a Reconstruction and the defeat of Reconstruction.

**CWBR:** I actually would like to hear you talk about that a little bit more because so much of the second half of the book does show what you were just talking about, how important it is that there are black Americans taking agency in their own emancipation, and it doesn't come down to whether they win or lose individual engagements in which they're deployed, it's the fact that they're there. But then the war does conclude with this disappointment of reconstruction.

**King:** Well actually I mentioned David Blight earlier, he had suggested the question of when did reconstruction end? He ends with the interesting idea that it

never ended, in other words that struggle within our history has continued down to today. It has a very different flavor and balance of forces and dynamic in each succeeding decade, but it's continued to roll on, never with complete resolution, never yet with complete quality and acceptance of the black nation within the United States. We continue to see--I don't need to bring up examples--but Ferguson would seem coincidental, but I don't think it can be considered coincidental.

**CWBR:** Do you think that kind of falling short, or perhaps the fact that it never really does resolve in a positive fashion, would lead you to say that [lack of resolution] has something to do with the fact that as powerful as this grassroots impetus can be, it's also very tough to turn into a cohesive structure? Or would you say that really the problem is not that the grassroots impetus for freedom wasn't strong enough, but that there's this continuing and ongoing grassroots kind of counter-revolution in American history that's always trying to push back?

**King:** In history I would say it continually shows itself in new forms, but also it needs new forms of defeat. There's no promised land and no resolution of struggle in human existence. We should hope, we may be faced with it, but that's extinction I think, a society without history. History is the narration of the struggles. People who study this aren't always aware of it of course or some are, but it is continually re-presented. The Civil War era is a classic case of that. People are stirred by images of combat and in who was there or what canteens they carried or armaments and all of that. I find that I had to pay attention to the strategic and tactical points of these battles. In the writing of it I wrote in terms of what I thought was essential in terms of its strategic importance. I brought to the foreground what had not been present in most histories of the Civil War which was the black presence in it, and that black agency, which was important to the resolution it had in that period. I quote Douglass on one of his magnificent speeches late in the war when they had a convention of blacks to consider he said, "Come let us reason together. You may not have such an opportunity in 100 years," and that exactly what it took before there was that upsurge that we saw in the 50's and 60's (historians know the incidents and conditions). Of course there were people and events prior to that, but that grassroots movement come up again in a magnificent way. This is the essential American story, that struggle. I don't believe it's resolved in any one period. The struggle adjourned from the battlefields to other venues, to the social venue and to the courts, and the mass movements. We did neglect poor Fredrick Douglass and John Brown in this discussion, that I think is the key which is why I subtitled the book *John Brown*,

*Frederick Douglass and The Making of a Free Country*. That was a crucial relationship in our American narrative, and it has been neglected. Of course there's been recent scholarship The [James Oakes] book, *The Radical and The Republic*. I based myself largely on Douglass's own writings in his journalism and his speeches which merits a lot more attention than it usually gets. I let him speak in a full sense on many occasions there are actual words and writings. It's interesting to think too that Douglass, his house burnt down, he lost all of his volumes of the *North Star*, Frederick Douglass' paper, all of these papers and correspondence, and he remarks in *Life and Times* if he said or did anything important it was in the period covered in the papers he lost in that fire which was 1845 through 1860. Yet most people study him after the civil war as a figure in that period.

**CWBR:** Also the period where he knew John Brown.

**King:** Yes and that was going to be my next statement. All of his work on John brown, so scholars haven't had the benefit of going directly to those papers. I was mentioning Phillip Foner's volumes the *Life and Writings of Fredrick Douglass*, which is a 5 volume series. I don't know how many people read those, but I've broke the backs of several of them, bent the pages right out the book in find that it is a marvelous history of the period, in the most comprehensive sense. It's not incidental or undeserving of study, and I'm sure many scholars have gone to it, but I don't think it's been quite appreciated to the extent that merits even yet. Brown and Douglass, the meaning of their relationship the depth and contact I try to bring out in the book but the skeleton is based on Douglass's on writings.

**CWBR:** Thank you Mr. King, for taking your time to discuss your most recent work *To Raise Up a Nation: John Brown, Fredrick Douglass, and The Making of A Free Country*.